

Translation Quality: Remarks Prepared by Shuckran Kamal for the ILR
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Ladies, and gentlemen, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Standing before you right now is a fool who rushed to accept your generous invitation to speak about translation quality. After the enormity of this daunting task sank in, I heard a voice in my head ask, “Who are you? What makes you think you can or are qualified to talk about translation quality? Don’t you remember that when you first started in this business, you did not have a clue about translation quality?” Well, I do remember, and it is because my own notion of quality has been evolving that I convinced myself eventually that I might have something to contribute to this discussion. So here it goes.

What is quality in a translation? What is that elusive feature, and who is responsible for it? Let me propose that quality in a translated text is a combination of textual characteristics that make a text readable, informative, complete, and accurate when compared to the source text. Responsibility for that feature lies primarily with the translator. To a lesser extent it also lies with the user of the translation and with the entity that commissions the translation. (That entity can be a translation manager, a project manager, or a translation bureau). In other words the translator, the translation manager, and the user of the translation have roles to play to ensure that a translated text is a quality text. That is what I would like to discuss briefly today.

Let me start with an illustrative anecdote. A few days ago I came across the translation of an op-ed article by Thomas Friedman that appeared in an Arabic daily newspaper that is published in London. As loosely translated by me, the Arabic article was entitled “The Ridiculous [Component of] the Nuclear Game and Brussels Pastry.” Because the key to my heart is anything with sugar in it, I thought I’d find out about this new pastry that I had never heard of before – never mind the nuclear game. I soon concluded from the anecdote cited in the first paragraph of the article, just as other readers of Arabic who are living or did live in the West did, that the Brussels pastry, tantalizingly referred to in the title, turned out to be Brussels sprouts! Then, a subsequent cursory comparison of the translated text with the source text in English (in the May 11, 2005 edition of the New York Times) revealed two omissions from the source text: the first omission was part of a sentence in the second paragraph, and the second was an entire paragraph, the 7th paragraph in Friedman’s text. Although the translated text used grammatically accurate, readable Arabic to convey to the reader in Arabic

most of the information that Mr. Friedman intended to convey to his audience, it is my opinion that this op-ed piece failed to meet reasonable quality standards for the following reasons: the translator failed to complete the professional requirements of his or her job; the newspaper editor, who commissioned the translation, failed to take appropriate quality control measures; and users or readers of this article, whether or not they know better, will probably not express dissatisfaction with an article that provides inaccurate and incomplete information. In other words, there was failure in each step of this proposed or, what we might call, a virtual trilateral system of quality assurance.

In my humble opinion, ladies and gentlemen, this anecdote symbolizes in a nutshell where quality assurance in translation stands at the present time. It is failing. That is why what I would like to do today is discuss briefly the responsibilities of the translator, of the translation bureau, and of the requester or ultimate user of a translation.

Although the translator remains the main pillar of quality in a translation, the translation bureau and the user of a translation play vital roles in ensuring the quality of a translation. I will attempt to lay out the situation as I see it today, what is being done to improve this situation, and propose a course of action that if taken could very well speed us along towards our shared and common goal of having consistently high quality translations in all languages.

A significant quantity of literature about translation quality is now available in books and professional journals. And yet, translation quality remains somewhat elusive to practitioners of translation, to their employers, and to users of translation. It seems to me that the reason why the concept continues to be elusive to some can be attributed to facts and conditions that continue to exist in the business and practice of translation.

First, to some practitioners of translation the concept of quality appears to be irrelevant or thought to mean that all they have to do to provide their clients with a quality translation is to turn in to the requester a clean, attractive, or camera-ready copy of a text in the target language by or before the deadline. Such practitioners frequently do not understand that basic research, checking and double-checking essential facts, and self-review are important parts of their job. It is unfortunate, but many users of translated texts and a

significant number of translation project managers continue to share that view.

Second, some employers of translators agree with those practitioners of translation that I've just described: they happily believe that a translation that looks good and arrives on or before the deadline is a quality translation. Such employers usually do not have contractors or employees who can check the factual and linguistic accuracy and readability of a target text in a foreign language. Other employers of translators may have access to skillful editors who can check the linguistic accuracy and readability of a target text in English, but in many cases those individuals are unable to check the translation for factual accuracy because they do not read the foreign, source language text. And we all know that skillful editors and reviewers in English are a rare commodity and that skillful editors and reviewers in any language other than English are harder to find. Consequently, many employers of translators settle for checking the accuracy of what they **can** check: dates, numbers, and proper names, if any. Others resort to the useless and unreliable approach of hiring another person to back translate a text, usually back into English.

Third, most translation users who seek the services of a freelance translator or a translation bureau usually do not know enough about the business or profession of translation. They do not realize that they must play a vital, albeit small role in ensuring the quality of a translated text. They do not realize that their role goes beyond setting a deadline for the translation and paying for it. Today, many translation users remain passive participants in the quality equation. Unfortunately, many of them are satisfied with a translation if it meets their deadline, if it looks good, and if they can, or if they think they can get from it some of the information that meets some, if not all of their needs.

This, in a nutshell, is where quality control in the translation business stands today. And we can all agree that we have a long way to go. Today, the American Translators Association is working hard with many professional translators to change this situation. Its Certification Program, which focuses primarily on the quality of the translator's work, has evolved significantly to the better since its inception more than two decades ago. Efforts to standardize evaluation standards for certification tests across all the languages of the program continue to be pursued energetically and enthusiastically. Workshops and training sessions are held regularly to

refine the process of identifying and classifying translation errors as well as quantifying their impact on translation quality. As these efforts continue, other efforts have begun and are now underway to establish standard criteria for selecting test passages that would present comparably equal challenges to all candidates regardless of their language combination. All this is part of an ongoing effort to give the practicing professional translator, who is and remains the main pillar of translation quality, a better handle on quality and to assist him or her with the task of providing a quality product to his or her clients.

The ILR Skill Level Descriptions for Translation, the final draft of which was released to the community in February of this year, is another major successful attempt to bring the concept of quality translation closer to the employers of translators in the U.S. government. It is my hope that major government contractors as well as translation bureaus will be able to use this valuable document to provide our government with better quality services in the near future. It is also my sincere hope that this document will continue to evolve and that it will be used more and more by major government contractors and translation bureaus to persuade them that unless their translators meet certain strict criteria for quality, no amount of quality assurance they may have in place after a text is translated will guarantee their ultimate client a quality product.

Efforts to educate users of translated texts continue to be made on an ad hoc basis by individual professional translators, and in recent years those efforts received a shot in the arm when the Public Relations Committee of the ATA launched its ambitious program of educating the public and the media about our profession. Ladies and gentlemen, we all have a role to play to persuade translation users that they do indeed have a role to play in the quality of a translated text: they must spell out their expectations and their needs. Translation users must be persuaded to share with translators and with project managers any reference materials as well as information about how the translated text is to be used. They must also be willing to consider the translator's and/or the project manager's advice on appropriate content or style modifications that may be required in the target language text to make it more suitable for its target audience. In short, translation users must be persuaded to move beyond their current passive stance of being satisfied with a translated text if it meets their deadline, if it looks good, and if they can or if they think they can get from it some of the information that meets some, if not all of their needs.

All of us have heard arguments about the subjective nature of determining the quality of any given translated text. All of us have also heard it said that the criteria of quality will vary depending on the nature of the text or document to be translated. All of us have also heard the argument that some employers of translators and some users of translation are satisfied with a translation that conveys 90 to 95 percent of the information or meaning of the source text. Putting all these arguments aside, I am here today to propose that determining quality in a translated text is something that can be measured quite objectively. It is not subjective at all, and I further propose to you that those who advance such arguments care little about the profession or do not understand it at all. I think that all of us here can agree that a quality translation is one that must be free of spelling errors, grammatical errors, omitted units of meaning, added units of meaning, or terms that are inappropriate for the context. There is nothing subjective in the nature of such errors or translation inadequacies or in the task of identifying them. Nor is there anything subjective about weighting them or assigning them a numerical value that measures their over-all impact on the translated text. The error-coding chart adopted by the ATA does exactly that, and many translation bureaus and employers of translators have their own error coding charts to determine quality and to evaluate candidates and potential hires.

Let me repeat that I believe there is nothing subjective about requiring a translation to convey accurately all the information contained in the original source text and to do so in a well-written, grammatically accurate and idiomatic text [levels 3 & 3+]. Some people might think that the *tone* of a source text as well as its implicit units of meaning are matters of subjective judgment, and yet experienced, knowledgeable translators can understand, describe, and convey into the target language text both tone and implicit units of meaning by performing a careful analysis of the source text to identify those features that set the tone of the text and embed meaning into it. They can then use the appropriate linguistic devices to convey the equivalent information content and tone of the Source Text language in the target language text [levels 4 & 4+].

I've talked briefly about criteria for a quality translation and also about the crucial role that translators play in ensuring quality and the supporting role that translation bureaus or translation managers and translation users also play in the quality equation. What I would like to mention now to conclude my remarks has to do with some of the specific skills that in my humble

opinion a translator must have to provide quality translations. In addition to familiarity with their subject matter, translators must have research skills and the know how to know how and where to look to find the information they need to complete their task. They must be well-read individuals with a curious mind who can read and understand texts dealing with a variety of subjects. Most importantly, they must have a thorough and profound functioning understanding of the source and target languages in which they work. In practice, that means they must be able to distill the meaning encoded in the source text and, reshape it according to the rules of the target language text and then encode it in that language. They must also be able to understand what they are doing, and they must be able to explain to others why they are doing it. Because this is a skill that develops over an extended period of time, it is a skill that our schools and academic institutions must pay close attention to. Unfortunately, however, neither our schools nor our academic institutions are paying attention to the task of helping their students develop the skill and ability they need to have to understand their language and utilize it with skill and intelligence. This means that greater emphasis must be placed throughout the education process on the fundamentals of grammar and good reading and writing skills. Those fundamentals must not be sacrificed in favor of technology and its dizzying advancements. We must all insist that educational institutions do a better job in that area to improve students' language and writing skills. Unless we do so, ladies and gentlemen, and unless we continue our ad hoc efforts to upgrade the language and writing skills of professionals who are in the work force today, I fear that the daunting and Herculean task of gaining and expanding our understanding and appreciation of the concept of quality translation will continue to be a Sisyphean one.

A SHORT LIST OF SUGGESTED READINGS ON TRANSLATION
QUALITY Compiled for the ILR Plenary Meeting, May 20, 2005

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